

MAHSEER (*BARBUS TOR*)  
IN BURMA AND THEIR HABITS

BY

A. MACDONALD

(*With two plates and a text-figure*)

Myitkyina, which is about 700 miles from Rangoon, is the rail-head of the Burma Railway and the head quarters of the most Northern Frontier District of Burma.

It is, besides, the headquarters of two Military Police Battalions. It has a very nice club, in which there is a fishing book kept, but unfortunately it only gives notes on the fishing in the higher reaches near Putao (Fort Hertz). Mine is the first note on the actual confluence and the water near Myitkyina.

These two great rivers, the Mali and the N'Mai Kha, come into confluence forming the Irrawadi, 29 miles north of Myitkyina. It can be reached by motor car, or at least to within a mile of the actual confluence, at a place called Thangpae, a Kachin village, from where a good path leads off. This is on the main road to Putao. The road is at present being rebridged in order that motor transport will be able to run up to Sumprabum, a Military post and sub-division about half-way to Putao, 90 miles from Myitkyina. When this road is completed, the Mali Kha will be much easier to fish up to a point (Tiang Kha) 58 miles from Myitkyina. The river is alongside the road most of the way, and about 200 feet below.

The river up to this point (Tiang Kha) has some excellent rapids and will stand any quantity of fishing.

During the three years I was resident in this district, I know of no one giving this water a trial. Col. Summerville went up to the higher reaches in 1924, a distance of 220 miles, leaving this wonderful water. His best fish was 52 pounds; the best that season was 63½ pounds also caught in the higher reaches. In 1925 and 1926 there was no fishing done by the residents of Myitkyina, to my knowledge, though the river here is all good. Five miles below Myitkyina is where the record fish for Burma was caught, 92 pounds.

I was myself never able to get up to Myitkyina except for a week in May 1926, when the river was discoloured and the snow water down; I did no good. This season and 1927, there have been several keen fishermen on the water, in fact the whole station was keen, even the ladies! The confluence received attention on week-ends, being now conveniently reached by car. Nothing larger than 40 pounds was taken.

This season, these waters also had visitors. Two rods went to Seniku for a week, another celebrated spot in this district, where a

fishing log book is kept, and large fish have been taken, 29 miles from Myitkyina up the N'Mai Kha, where two rivers come into confluence, then run a couple of miles and join the N'Mai Kha.

It is at the confluence, of the Mali, and N'Mai I think, that Rivett Carnac's fine fish of 119 pounds will be beaten. I have seen fish rising here that were 18 inches across the back if an inch, so judge for yourself what their weight might be ?

The local people, Kachins, are of no value to you as they are a lazy crowd, so all arrangements should be made at Myitkyina.

The Sub-Divisional Officer, who is generally a sportsman and very obliging, will do all to assist you in obtaining a boat ; which is necessary, and mule or cart transport for your kit. Mule transport is most satisfactory, and enables one, if necessary, to leave the road, and camp alongside the river. Cars are not available on hire but there are a number of merchants (Chinamen and Indians), who own cars and generally lend them if approached nicely.

Supplies should all be taken up with you as the Kachin is reluctant to sell his fowls, keeping them for *Nat* (Spirit) offerings. A shot gun and rifle should also be part of one's kit as there is a quantity of small game, and an occasional tiger which might be shot. I shot snipe both Fantail and Pintail in May. R. T. also got a woodcock.

There is a nasty little fly which bites and settles on you in swarms here. There are in fact, hundreds of different varieties of biting bugs from the large green-eyed horse fly to the little fellow, besides the blood blister fly, and then of course you get the mosquito and sand fly at night. It would be as well to take up Citronella in large quantities for both yourself and your following. Illness in any quantity, up here, would completely ruin your trip. The usual medicine chest should also accompany one, as the local people frequently come round asking for treatment. A gramophone also is much appreciated at night, and the village turn out *en masse* from the old grey-haired ladies to the youngest babes. Jack Smith is much appreciated.

Boatmen are obtainable with boats at Myitkyina and take two days to get up to Thangpae, but I would suggest that the boat be joined at Chingkran Zup, a bungalow at the twenty-second mile.

From here up all the water is good, and two miles above you come to the 'Rocks' which must hold enormous fish. I did not work this water thoroughly as I intended doing it on my return ; but had to cut my fishing trip short. It is a barrier of rock across the river, breaking the water up into five channels at the tail of a fast rapid. Most of this water can be got at by boat.

The fishing from Ching Kran Zup, 22 miles from Myitkyina to Tiang Kha, a distance of 37 miles is all good, though some of the best looking water proved most disappointing.

The actual confluence is unparalleled from the results we had. I got on to this water on April 12th and joined R.T. who had been up about a fortnight before I arrived. We took, between us, up to May 8th, 66 Mahseer weighing 1187½ pounds, an average of 18 pounds. Of these fish all but 180 pounds were caught at the confluence.

The higher reaches of the Mali Kha were not thoroughly tried out, as we had no boats, causing many of the best places to be left.

The five largest fish we took were 75, 55, 50, 45, and 44 pounds, losing many others. One fish I had on for just under two hours. Hooked at the favourite spot of the monsters, he took me down stream in short determined rushes, about six hundred yards. I followed in a boat, when the spring of my Silex reel broke causing me to hold on to the drum to prevent an over-run. I fought him like this for an hour, till R.T. joined me. We then managed to effect a change of the spring from his reel to mine during a spell of sulking.

He worked us down to the head of the main Zup (confluence) into the 'V' where it was impossible to follow in a boat; the reel again gave trouble, the drum jammed as he made off, causing the trace to give.

What this fish weighed is left to the imagination. At the end of nearly two hours fighting and a heavy strain the whole time, he was complete master of the situation; I could do nothing with him.

The 75 pounder, though game and going strong the whole time, I killed in forty minutes, hooked lightly through the eye.

R.T. lost a fish in exactly the same place. He got into his fish nearly a mile above the actual Zup and was brought down after crossing the river seven times with only short spells of sulking. He lost his fish after a two hour's fight.

A description of the confluence may here be of interest. These two rivers run in as Rapids forming a large deep pool which is the home of the grandmothers; it is over a hundred feet deep in places, with outcrops of rock dotted about. The Mali Kha is a hundred yards wide and the tail of the rapid where it enters the pool has a number of large 'Rock Islands' breaking up the water into a number of narrow channels. The water of this river is not as clear but warmer than that of the N'Mai. The N'Mai Kha is much the faster and larger of the two, but its crystal clear waters, which are always very cold, proved most disappointing, though otherwise the better-looking water of the two.

What has been most interesting to me, and I hope will be to readers also, is that there are at least six distinct varieties of mahseer to be taken in these waters.

I have endeavoured to describe their colourings and general differences which though humble, will serve the purpose of identification by fishermen.

I kept the fish alive in the water beside me while I undertook this difficult task. They all fit the description of Dr. Day's *Barbus tor* in the main points i.e. Barbels, 'Fin' rays, and lateral line, etc. (see photographs).

Firstly there is the common Himalayan Mahseer with a decided black line down the side. The second is the Thick-lip which is also well known. Then comes the Black Mahseer which is common both in India and Burma, where the banks of streams are overgrown with thick forest. The other three as will be seen from the photographs, are quite different in shape having a small head and thick stocky tail like a salmon.

I have called these fish the Copper Mahseer (which Thomas mentions as occurring in Assam, only the fins mentioned are



At the entrance of the N'Mai into the Confluence. (A morning's catch in the foreground.)



Our last morning's catch on the Confluence. Four ordinary Mahseer (38, 21, 9 and 6 lbs. respectively), with a 15-lb. Black Mahseer in the centre. (Note its dark colour. The black line down the side is clearly noticeable in the ordinary variety.)



A 16-lb. Chocolate Fish and 23-lb. Ordinary Mahseer.  
(Note stockier build and smaller head and mouth of the former.)



A 44-lb. Thick-lip (l) and 25-lb. Copper Fish (r).  
(Note modified thickness of lips in right-hand specimen; also concave snout and small head and mouth. The adipose extension of the lower lip can also be made out in the larger fish.)

vermillion in colour, whereas this fish's fins are sky blue), the Chocolate and the Red Mahseer. I give the descriptions for what they are worth.

1. *The Golden or Himalayan Mahseer*.—This is the commonest and the same as the Indian Fish.

He is long and narrow as a rule with a distinct black line down his entire length, two half scales in width above the lateral line.

Head large and long, top half green, lower half pale green running into silver.

Above lateral line colour from golden with a mauve tinge on silver-grey background to a deep golden tinge running into dark green on the back. Below lateral line, a beautiful olive-gold with a dull silver background. Fins blend with colouring; dorsal, green and dirty pink, ventral and pectoral pale green to olive with red fringe. Eye: Iris golden, pupil black. Belly white.

2. *The Thick-lipped Mahseer*.—Same colouring as Himalayan Mahseer differing only in the head. Chief features are the thick lips with the adipose extension which is well illustrated in Thomas' 'Rod in India'.

These are also common, best taken 44lbs.

3. *The Black Mahseer*.—He is quite a different fish and of a stocky build. Head small and black, mouth small. Barbels and eyes black.

This fish is marked by a jet black line two half scales above the lateral line, scales above having a tinge of gold on the scale tips running to jet black on the back. Below lateral line scales are lighter but dirty white, almost shot black to the scales on belly, which are dirty white with a black fringe. Fins black with grey at base. Best fish taken 19 pounds.

4. *The Copper Mahseer*.—This is quite the most beautiful of all; he is bright copper all over with a sheen running into all the colours of the rainbow. He runs from the deepest shades of copper with a delicate mauve sheen throughout to the more delicate shades of copper with shell pink, on a background of shot silver and gold. The head is small, the nose slightly concave, the lips are a modification of the thick-lip variety, the adipose continuation of the lower jaw is clearly defined but very much modified and not as much pronounced as in the thick-lipped variety. Fins deep blue, except tail fin which has a red fringe. Belly delicate shade of yellow; eyes bright copper; pupil deep indigo blue.

Three of this variety were caught; best fish 25 pounds.

5. *The Chocolate Mahseer*.—Head round and square, like a Labeo. Colour, bronze running through delicate shades into purple. No black line above lateral line. Above lateral line chocolate running into blue to dark chocolate on back, with polished bronze tinge to scale tips. Below lateral line, running from faint silvery blue to white on belly to the extent of three complete rows of scales, with half row on either side, clearly defined making four.

Bright orange spots under lower jaw on chin; lips thin.

Fins sky blue; iris chocolate; pupil black. Two fish of this kind taken; best 28 pounds.

6. *The Red Mashcer*.—Head small and round, top of which is shot gold and purple, also gill plates; mouth small. Above lateral line, beautiful sea-green, shot with silver, tips of scales salmon pink. Below lateral line, mauve with silver, vermillion tips to scales; belly pink; fins all bright red.

Eye golden; pupil indigo blue. Took five of these fish; best 18 pounds.

We took besides, two distinct varieties of goonch (*Bagarius yarrelli*). One has the green backing instead of the yellow, as in the Ganges fish, with the black. The green is dark and could be described as dirty with small black spots. The other colour is black. The feelers are green, with black spots, also the fins. My first introduction to these brutes was on April 28th. The second type has no black but is dirty green all over, but has otherwise the same marking as his cousin. The largest taken was 48 pounds.

*Butchwa* (*Pseudentropius garua*) run large, best taken, 5½ pounds. The average weight of a dozen fish worked out at three pounds.

*Silund* (*Silundia gangetica*). Only one caught here, of 3 pounds, but have had 22 and 15 pounds fish at Namti, in a tributary of the Irrawadi.

*Barilius bola*. These sporting fish are found in large quantities in all the rivers in this district. I have caught them over 2 pounds, though Thomas puts this as their maximum weight.

There is no Chilwa (*Chela argentea*) in this river, but this is replaced by a small fish about two inches long, with a black stripe down the side; I don't know it, it is seen going up in swarms along the sides, on occasions.

The extraordinary thing was that in only one fish of all we caught, did we find a small fish in its stomach. There was nothing but slime, grit, and leaves found. They certainly do feed on rank vegetation, as one can sometimes see them cruising about and looking for the favoured titbit, among the many kinds collected in still backwaters. I had a demonstration by a Burman, of their leaf-eating habits at Namti (another good fishing spot in this district) on pumpkin leaf. The current was slow, running into a deep pool, he broke up this leaf, and threw in pieces. After it had drifted a little way down, the water was alive with fish clambering over one another to get it. (A useful tip for your note book).

For two days (April 26th and 27th), the *Butchwa* were feeding by the hundred on shoals of small fish, which resembled *Labeo* about 9 or ten inches long, but I never once saw a Mahseer join them.

Whether the Mahseer here feed on small fish or not remains a problem to be solved. Dead bait spinning never did any good, the fish that were taken (all on spoon), were feeding very deep.

They may prefer the Stone Loach, and find him in sufficient numbers not to worry about the migratory fish, though this can hardly be so.

Most of the fish (of all the species) we took were full of spawn. It was a pity to be removing so many thousands of eggs from the river, but the method of killing our fish prevented our putting them